

## **GRAPEVINE MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA**

### **1. THE STUDY AREA - 66,800 acres**

The Grapevine Mountains Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (NV-060-355) is located in Esmeralda and Nye Counties, Nevada along the California-Nevada border about twenty miles northwest of Beatty Nevada. This WSA contains 66,800 acres of public land with no private inholdings.

The northwestern boundary of the Grapevine Mountains WSA roughly parallels State Highway 72. The northeastern boundary is the Bullfrog Hills-Bonnie Clair Road. The southeastern boundary is the Willow Springs Road. The southwestern boundary is the Death Valley National Monument.

There were three alternatives analyzed in the EIS: an all wilderness alternative, a no wilderness alternative and a partial wilderness alternative where 23,150 acres would be designated as wilderness and 43,650 acres would be released for uses other than wilderness and is the recommendation of this report.

### **2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 23,150 acres recommended for wilderness 43,650 acres recommended for nonwilderness**

The recommendation for this WSA is to designate 23,150 acres as wilderness and release 43,650 acres for uses other than wilderness. The recommendation differs from the proposed action contained in the Final Esmeralda-Southern Nye Wilderness EIS. Additional study of the area, focused on the relationship of the WSA to the Death Valley National Monument wilderness study area, led to the conclusion that a portion of the WSA should be recommended for wilderness. The portion now recommended was analyzed as a partial wilderness alternative in the EIS.

The area's ruggedness has been primarily responsible for the perpetuation of its naturalness, and also contributes to its excellent scenic quality, especially along the southwest side where deep flood drainages knife deep into the center of the area. Along that same side are numerous examples of unique erosion patterns brought about by torrential rains which infrequently grace the area. The view from the top is even more impressive. To the south the Death Valley National Monument with its salt covered valley falls rapidly to the lowest elevation in the United States. The vast perspective created by the vertical fall of nearly 8,000 feet emphasizes the vastness of the country. To the west, north and east, the view stretches over the Queer Mountain WSA, and Sarcobatus flat with its dry lake bed covering over thirty square miles. Rocky outcrops colored in hues of deep red, brilliant yellow, and gray-green fill the canyons. A large alluvial bench skirts the western, northern, and eastern approaches to the mountains.

The Grapevine WSA is in a vegetation transition zone. However, unlike the Queer Mountain WSA, The Grapevine WSA's hot desert/cold desert vegetation zones do not intermix. A distinctive line separates the hot and cold desert vegetation. The alluvial benches are vegetated with creosote bush and Joshua trees common to hot desert environments. Once ascending into the foothills, populations of cold desert species including big sage and saltbush immediately replace the hot desert species. The higher elevations are covered with thinly populated groves of pinyon pine and juniper trees interspersed with small meadows covered with big sage.

The area is characterized by extremes in temperature and precipitation. During the summer months, temperatures soar into the 120 degree range along the alluvial fans. Winter brings extreme cold temperatures to the mountain peaks while the valleys below remain moderate. Precipitation is sparse (3.5 inches per year), and generally comes in torrents of rain during the summer creating flash floods. Willow Spring, located on the southeast side of the WSA provides the only yearlong, open water. Populations of desert bighorn sheep, mule deer, and wild horses and burros are common near Willow Spring.

The wild, untrammeled setting provides many outstanding opportunities for recreation. Hiking, camping, and backpacking are demanding because of the difficult terrain, harsh climatic conditions, and lack of water. The challenge presented to adventurers will test backcountry skills and resourcefulness. Many hidden places still exist and the exhilaration of discovery will reward those willing to accept the challenge.

The Grapevine Mountains WSA has a moderate potential for metallic minerals in the southern mountainous terrain. The Esmeralda/ Southern Nye Wilderness EIS suggested that some of the existing claims are expected to prove valid and be developed.

The flat, wide open alluvial benches would create manageability problems with off-road vehicle use. There are over 40,000 acres of open country that would require extensive patrolling. There are no physical barriers to ORV use within one to four miles of the boundary on both sides of the range. The broad washes, that drain the east side of the WSA, are open terrain allowing vehicle access one to two miles up into the mountains. The open terrain would make closure of the various ways and washes extremely difficult.

The Grapevine Mountains WSA is contiguous to Death Valley National Monument WSA No. 4 and across a highway from the Queer Mountain WSA.

### **3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS**

**A. Naturalness:** The mountainous section of the Grapevine WSA is in a nearly pristine condition. Deep canyons and steep mountains with sweeping views of the surrounding valleys all enhance the primitive feeling of the WSA. The lack of perennial water sources has served to discourage livestock grazing. Vegetation has been undisturbed and combined with the combination of hot and cold desert vegetation the unique nature lends to the area's naturalness.

Unnatural features are restricted to the lower elevations. A sand and gravel pit is located just inside the northwest boundary. Three miles of way and three short sections of cat work are inside the western edge of the northwestern bajada. Along the eastern edge of the WSA an unauthorized mining placer operation was discovered. Although reclaimed, the activity created a way and the site is noticeable. Reconstruction of the spring development at willow spring created disturbances to the vegetation around the spring.

The Grapevine Mountains WSA consists of the northern end of the Grapevine Mountain range and its foothills. It has numerous peaks over 7,000 feet with the highest at 7,694. The WSA also includes two broad bajadas which drain the range towards Sarcobatus Flat on the northeast and Bonnie Clair Flat on the northwest. The lowest point on the bajadas is 4,000 feet.

**B. Solitude:** The Grapevine Mountains WSA provides outstanding opportunity for solitude. Topographic screening is provided by the many canyons and rugged layout of the mountain high country. The scattered groves of pinyon pine and juniper trees provides screening at the higher elevations. The lack of destination points and the many peaks in the area also serve to disperse recreation use. The perception of solitude is enhanced by vertical fall of 8,000 feet from the top of the Grapevine mountains to the bottom of Death Valley. The alluvial benches skirting the mountains and foothills provide less suitable opportunity for solitude. The close proximity to State Highway 72 along the western side of the WSA would also preclude solitude.

**C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** The wild, untrammeled setting provides many outstanding opportunities for recreation. Hiking, camping, and backpacking are demanding because of the difficult terrain, harsh climatic conditions, and lack of water. The challenge presented to adventurers will test backcountry skills and resourcefulness heightening the wilderness experience. Many hidden places still exist and the exhilaration of discovery will reward those willing to accept the challenge. The spectacular views of Death Valley provide excellent opportunities for photography.

**D. Special Features:** From the top of the Grapevine WSA, one is able to view all of Death Valley from a single vantage point while in the solitude of a pristine environment. Other areas allowing views of the Monument have active mining programs in the immediate vicinity which distract from the experience.

#### **4. MANAGEABILITY**

The Grapevine Mountains WSA is considered to be manageable over the long-term. The Grapevine Mountains WSA has two types of management problems: mining claims and the potential for indiscriminate vehicle use. Random vehicle use will be difficult to control. Over 40,000 acres of the Grapevine Mountains WSA are broad bajadas, alluvial fans, that slope from the mountains to the boundary roads. There are no physical barriers to ORV use within one to four miles of the boundary on both sides of the range. These areas cannot be closed to vehicles without a major enforcement effort.

#### **5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES**

The Grapevine Mountains WSA has a moderate potential for metallic minerals in the southern mountains, about 30 percent of the WSA. The WSA contains sixty acres of pre-FLPMA claims, located on the west flank of the range, and 1,500 acre of post-FLPMA claims, covering Helmet Mountain and the large canyon to the south of it. Some of the existing claims are expected to prove valid and be developed. Five miles of road would be developed along routes previously used for exploration. A total of 19.5 acres would be physically disturbed from mineral exploration and development activity. There are no oil and gas or geothermal leases. Within the WSA are 19,420 acres with a moderate potential for metallic mineral resources. Leasable mineral potential is low for oil and gas and moderate for geothermal resources. The bajadas have a moderate potential for non-metallics.

#### **6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Eight comments were received during the initial inventory in 1979. Six agreed with further study of the area and two disagreed. Ten specific comments on the WSA and 2,327 general comments, stating the unit met the wilderness criteria, during the intensive inventory in 1980. Of the specific comments, several noted intrusions, a lack of wilderness values and other conflicting resource values. A few discussed the area's naturalness, outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation. Two specific comments were received on this WSA during the issue identification process for the RMP. Both were opposed to wilderness designation. Three general comments were opposed to any wilderness in the planning area. Public meetings were held in Pahrump, Goldfield, and Las Vegas, Nevada. During the public hearing and comment period, a total of 49 comments addressing this WSA were received. Forty one supported more wilderness than the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) Preferred Alternative and eight supported the DEIS Preferred Alternative.

No local government commented on this WSA. The State, during the consistency review, concurred with the Preferred Alternative of no wilderness. The National Park Service recommended the WSA be recommended for wilderness. The Environmental Protection Agency stated the Criteria used in the selection of the Preferred Alternative was unclear.